Study Notes for the Sunday Mass Published by Christians for Christ Ministries. We are a non-denominational Christian ministry that seeks to encourage and facilitate Christians in studying the Holy Scriptures. **"For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus."** 1 Timothy 2:5

Sunday Mass Study Notes for Lectionary 591: 06-29-2025



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass study notes. This week, we begin with a reading from Acts 12, in which the evil King Herod imprisoned Peter. Then we move to the second reading from Saint Paul's Second Letter to Timothy, which is Paul's last written statement to the world just before his martyrdom. We conclude with this week's Gospel lesson, in which we will look at Peter's confession of Jesus as the much-awaited Messiah. We answer the question, what did Jesus mean when He said, *"You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it"* (Matthew 16:17)?

The first reading is from Acts 12, and the context is just after the apostles had heard that the Gospel had gone out to the Gentiles and that they also were being saved (Acts 11:1). Barnabus had found Saul (Paul) in his hometown of Tarsus (v. 25) and brought him to Antioch where he spent a year with him there (v. 26). It was in Antioch that Saint Luke reported that the believers were first called "Christians" (v. 25), likely a term of derision given to them by the pagans in the region. At the close of the chapter, God revealed through Agabus that a worldwide famine would occur. Subsequently, the church in Antioch took up a collection to send to the "brethren living in Judea" (v. 29). From the

end of Chapter 12, Peter's ministry faded from view. Paul became the prominent leader of the church, whose focus at that point also shifted from the Jews to the Gentiles. Paul later called himself "a prisoner of Christ for the Gentiles" (Ephesians 3:1), while Peter was the one who had been entrusted with the Gospel to the Jews (Galatians 2:8).

> *1 Now about that time Herod the king laid hands on some who belonged to the church in order to mistreat them. 2 And he had James the brother of John put to death with a sword. 3 When he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. Now it was during the days of Unleavened Bread. 4 When he had seized him, he put him in prison, delivering him to four squads of soldiers to guard him, intending after the Passover to bring him out before the people. 5 So Peter was kept in the prison, but prayer for him was being made fervently by the church to God. 6 On the very night when Herod was about to bring him forward, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and guards in front of the door were watching over the prison. 7 And behold, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared and a light shone in the cell; and he struck Peter's side and woke him up, saying, "Get up quickly." And his chains fell off his hands. 8 And the angel said to him, "Gird yourself and put on your sandals." And he did so. And he said to him, "Wrap your cloak around you and follow me." 9 And he went out and continued to follow, and he did not know that what was being done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision. 10 When they had passed the first and second guard, they came to the iron gate that leads into the city, which opened for them by itself; and they went out and went along one street, and immediately the angel departed from him. 11 When Peter came to himself, he said, "Now I know for sure that the Lord has sent forth His angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting." (Acts 12:1-11)*

The story revealed how God responded to the prayers of the church (v. 5) in a powerful way to secure Peter's release from prison. Peter testified that the Lord had sent an angel to rescue him from the King who had just killed his friend and fellow disciple James (v. 2). The events of that evening were so mystifying to Peter that he wasn't even sure that they were happening (v. 9). It was only after Peter had "[come] to himself" (v. 11) that he realized that his release was had occurred.

This story in Acts gives many reasons to fear God, not man. Hebrews 13:6 reminds us, "The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?" When we find ourselves in situations where someone in a position of power is misusing their authority to harm the cause of Christ, we can have confidence in standing up for our beliefs and doing the right thing, even if we are punished for it. Peter's life was in danger, and God delivered him. And for some reason, while God spared Peter's life at that time, He did not spare James' life. So, we don't always know the outcome of our faith, but we

do know that God is our helper, and we can turn to Him amid our fear and trust Him for the outcome. Ultimately, evil people are not in control. Even their evil is used by God for His redemptive purposes (Romans 8:28-30).

The Book of Acts is a story of transitions. As we close today's reading from Chapter 12, the focus in Acts shifted from Saint Peter to Saint Paul. In the same way that Peter was bold in sharing the Gospel with the Jews, Paul spread the Gospel message to the Gentiles and the far reaches of the Roman world. He endured many hardships, and as we move to the second reading, we will see the closing chapter of his adventurous life of faith as he prepares for his transition to eternal life in heaven.

The second reading today is from Paul's Second Letter to Timothy. In this address, Paul recorded one of his final statements to the church before he was martyred. We have included verses 9–16, which were skipped in the reading, to provide the full context.

> *6 For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. 7 I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith; 8 in the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing. 9 Make every effort to come to me soon; 10 for Demas, having loved this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica; Crescens has gone to Galatia, Titus to Dalmatia. 11 Only Luke is with me. Pick up Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful to me for service. 12 But Tychicus I have sent to Ephesus. 13 When you come bring the cloak which I left at Troas with Carpus, and the books, especially the parchments. 14 Alexander the coppersmith did me much harm; the Lord will repay him according to his deeds. 15 Be on guard against him yourself, for he vigorously opposed our teaching. 16 At my first defense no one supported me, but all deserted me; may it not be counted against them. 17 But the Lord stood with me and strengthened me, so that through me the proclamation might be fully accomplished, and that all the Gentiles might hear; and I was rescued out of the lion's mouth. 18 The Lord will rescue me from every evil deed, and will bring me safely to His heavenly kingdom; to Him be the glory forever and ever. Amen. (2 Timothy 4:6-18)*

Paul alluded to the practice in Jewish Law in which drink offerings were made (Exodus 29:40). The drink offering in the Old Testament pointed to the finished work of Jesus Christ in the New Testament. When we celebrate communion, we commemorate Jesus' finished work on the cross for our salvation through the pouring out of His blood for us. Paul used this terminology to say that, like Christ, he too would soon be offered up to God. Next, Paul requested the provision of some practical items, including a cloak and reading materials (v. 12). He warned his readers about Alexander the Coppersmith to prevent them from also coming into contact with him (vv. 14–15). Sadly, Paul commented that nobody stood by him in his first trial except for the Lord, who strengthened him so that he could complete his proclamation of the Gospel to the Gentiles (vv. 16–17). He knew that at any instant, he could be sent to heaven (v. 18).

As we approach the end of Paul's life, it is a fitting time to reflect on our own lives and the legacy we will leave behind. God used Paul in some amazing ways, but isn't it true that God wants to use all of us for His good work in the world? We may not have a worldwide ministry like Paul. Still, God wants us to be able to come to the end of our lives and be able to look back and say with Paul, "*I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith; in the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing.*" What does it mean to love or long for his appearing? How might this value system mark our lives? What do you need to be doing today and tomorrow so that you can say this at the end of your life?

As we move on to the Gospel lesson, let's pause to remember the great sacrifices that Paul made for us as members of his future Gentile church.

The Gospel reading this week is from Matthew 16. The context of the reading is just after Jesus fed the 4,000 alongside the Sea of Galilee (Matthew 15:33-39). Next, He went by boat to Magdala (v. 39), and then, just before today's reading, Jesus explained to His disciples what had happened regarding the feeding of the two large crowds: first the 5,000 and then the 4,000. After He did this, Jesus warned them to beware of "the leaven of the Pharisees" (Matthew 16:11), and then He traveled with them to the region known as Caesarea Philippi. It is in this region that, as we will see in today's reading, Peter made his famous confession that Jesus was the Christ, the much-awaited Messiah.

> *13 Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, He was asking His disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" 14 And they said, "Some say John the Baptist; and*

> *others, Elijah; but still others, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets." 15 He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" 16 Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." 17 And Jesus said to him, "Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven. 18 I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it. 19 I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven." (Matthew 16:13-19)*

Several significant points jump out of the text. First, Peter, the uncontested leader of the disciples, made the marvelous statement through the help of God the Father that Jesus was indeed the Messiah (v. 16). Jesus affirmed Peter's confession and went on to build upon it. What did Jesus mean when He told Peter, "Upon this rock I will build my church" (v.18b)? Jesus' meaning is clear when we look one level deeper into the plain meaning found in the original language. Peter, whose name in Greek is "Petros," literally means "rock." However, the foundation on which Jesus spoke about building the church is a different Greek word, "petra," which means a mass or rock. In context, what Jesus said was close to this paraphrase: "Simon, I am changing your name to Petros, and upon this petra (foundational mass of rock) I will build my church." Jesus said that He would build His church upon the foundation (petra, meaning a mass of rock or many large rocks), which, in context, refers to Peter's confession that Jesus is the Christ. Peter clarified this meaning in the First Epistle of Peter. Peter said, "You also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 2:5). Although Peter used the word "lithos" for stone, he stated how the individual stones are built up into a holy priesthood of believers "through Jesus Christ." The church is the collection of spiritual rocks that are built on the "petra" or foundation that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God (Matthew 16:16), through whom is the only way to eternal life (John 14:6).

Saint Paul used a similar analogy in explaining how God empowered him as the leader and builder of the church among the Gentiles (Ephesians 3:1), in the same way, that Peter was the builder of the church among the Jews (Galatians 2:8). Paul said, "According to the grace of God which was given to me, like a wise master builder I laid a foundation, and another is building on it. But each person must be careful how they build on it. For no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 3:10-11). In Ephesians, Paul clarified how Jesus intended the church to interpret this passage by pointing out that our faith has "been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the cornerstone" (Ephesians 2:20).

Paul used the symbolism of Jesus as the Rock or foundation in First Corinthians:

> *1 For I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that our fathers were all under the cloud and all passed through the sea; 2 and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea; 3 and all ate the same spiritual food; 4 and all drank the same spiritual drink, for they were drinking from a spiritual rock which followed them; and the rock was Christ. (1 Corinthians 10:1-4)*

When Paul said, "they were drinking from the spiritual rock" and "the rock was Christ" (v. 4), both times he used the word "petra." Jesus was the foundation stone, the One Who provided sustenance to the Hebrews escaping from the Pharaoh.

Jesus Himself explained the necessity of a sure foundation in Luke Chapter 6:

> *47 Everyone who comes to Me and hears My words and acts on them, I will show you whom he is like: 48 he is like a man building a house, who dug deep and laid a foundation on the rock; and when a flood occurred, the torrent burst against that house and could not shake it, because it had been well built. 49 But the one who has heard and has not acted accordingly, is like a man who built a house on the ground without any foundation; and the torrent burst against it and immediately it collapsed, and the ruin of that house was great. (Luke 6:47-49)*

When Jesus said, "he is like a man building a house, who dug deep and laid a foundation on the rock" (v. 48), the word in the original was "petra," The giant rock that was rolled to seal Jesus' tomb was a "petra" (Matthew 27:60). Peter **was** one of the foundational stone**s** (the apostles and prophets). Still, Jesus **is** the Chief Cornerstone, the Foundation of the Church. "For this is the will of My Father, that everyone who beholds the Son and believes in Him will have eternal life, and I Myself will raise him up on the last day" (John 6:40).

Second, Jesus said that He "will give you the keys of the kingdom in heaven and that whatever he bound on earth would be bound in heaven and whatever was loosed on earth would be loosed in heaven." We previously discussed this in the June 8, 2014, edition of Mass Notes. In summary, we said that the keys to the kingdom are salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. The binding and unbinding of sin is found in the gift of faith (Ephesians 2:8-9) when a person comes to the knowledge of Jesus Christ as their Savior. Peter and the other apostles were being sent out with authority to preach the Gospel (Matthew 28:18-20), which would be the entry point of faith. In a certain sense, they were being commissioned to open the doors of the Kingdom of God to others by their obedience

in proclaiming the Good news and making disciples. We then see Peter in Acts 2:14-40 fulfilling this call by preaching a message of repentance and salvation in Jesus Christ. This is in line with Jesus' teaching when He said, "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him" (John 3:36). Later, Jesus instructed the group of ten disciples (eleven less Thomas) gathered together in the upper room after His resurrection that anyone who believes in Him through the preaching of the Gospel will be saved. The keys of the Kingdom were being entrusted to this group of men who had been with Jesus in a personal way. They were going to be His hands and feet in the world from now on. The story of the Gospel continues to transform lives because we are all commissioned to be His ambassadors, representing God's love and truth to the world through our lives and our proclamation of the Good News (2 Corinthians 5:20).

Finally, Jesus said, "The gates of Hades will not overpower it" (v. 18c), meaning that all of the evil will not be able to overcome the God-ordained movement of the church. This is an essential statement that no matter how awful the world may become, the power of Satan will never destroy God's church. We can rest in the fact that Jesus has overcome the world (John 16:33, 1 Corinthians 15:57), and through Him alone, we can find the power to continue His commission of making disciples and teaching (Matthew 28:16-20).

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. All three passages for this week involve the opposition that Christians have had to face to be faithful to God. In what areas of your life have you faced opposition because of your faith? How can these passages strengthen your faith and give you the truth to hold onto in times of opposition?

2. Jesus asked his disciples a very pointed question: "Who do you say that I am?" At some point, each of us has to answer this question. How does Peter's response resonate with you? Is this the foundation on which you are building your life? If so, how does your life reflect this? If not, what foundation are you building your life on? Would you like Peter's response to be your response as well? You can pause and ask God to change the direction of your life so that you can build on the Chief Cornerstone, Jesus Christ.